



FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER'S

COURSE IN PRAYER

by Francis Merchant

LESSON 3

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BE A LAMP: THE HORIZONTAL APPROACH

Relationship

Man is not only related to his generating source, but to other units of consciousness as well. Born in a family, he is immediately linked to brothers, sisters, parents, relatives. In time he will develop a circle of friends. At school he is linked to teachers and fellow students. Marriage establishes a lifelong bond with a member of the opposite sex. In business he will find himself related to his employers, the customers he serves, and his associates. Then, too, he is linked to his country and to the inhabitants of other countries. Inasmuch as the earth is part of the universe, about which he knows very little, he is necessarily unaware of his relation to civilizations in other parts of the cosmos.

It would seem, then, that life prescribes relationships. No man can escape them. They are an inalienable part of life. The quality of relationship, however, man can determine. While he cannot escape being bound to others, he can affect the nature of the binding essence.

Each man, then, must decide how he wishes to relate himself to the rest of the human race. For example, does he wish to have them serve him, or is he willing to serve them? At the end of his life, will his obligations to them exceed their obligations to him, or vice versa?

The choices are varied. Thieves, criminals, forgers, and brigands seek to derive selfish profit out of their relationships. Exalting themselves, they fail to recognize their obligations to other units of consciousness. The perspective of the saint, the philanthropist, and the server of his fellows is quite different. They wish to confer more than they receive. They serve rather than demand to be served. On a completely different level, economists speak of a favorable balance of trade when exports ex-

ceed imports. Spiritually, we may perhaps speak of a favorable balance of usefulness when a great soul contributes more than he receives.

Relationship involves reciprocal action. Each one influences all the others in some measure. No one stands isolated and alone. This means that no one achieves only for himself; his accomplishment is a contribution to the general good.

The question then arises, How can the average citizen, weighed down by cares and exerting no great influence in the bustling world, make an outstanding contribution? The answer lies in the power of thought with which men have been dowered. Greatness lies within a human being, not outside him. It is not dependent on material prosperity or on making a great noise in the world. Rather it is to be found in the generosity, the compassion, the riches of the heart. Such greatness depends on the subtle quality of a man's thought.

Greatness of soul is denied to no one. It is dependent on the manner in which the individual chooses to use the gift of thought. Meanness of soul is failure, not lack of worldly goods. Elevated thought—and here we touch on prayer—is a spiritual contribution all by itself.

While men may say much about lack of money, no one seems to complain about a short supply of thought energy. It is always there, waiting to be used. It is available in poverty as well as in prosperity. As a spider creates a thread out of itself, so man shapes his destiny by thought. Out of this strange substance a man may build a hell in heaven and a heaven in hell. All books are but the precipitated thoughts of their authors, presented to readers in the form of words.

We are often asked to donate money to charitable enterprises, but we are less frequently requested to contribute our thoughts. However, prayer can be this immaterial kind of giving—and in such giving a man is increased, not diminished. Compassionate thought can be endlessly expressed with no sense of loss or any stringency of capital.

Herein lies a field of activity for every human being on the face of the globe and a means of becoming a benefactor to

one's fellows as well as to future generations. If he dedicates his thoughts to the upliftment of the race, he can perform a noble service and exert a beneficial influence in the world. Those who are troubled by world events and distressed by the perverse trends of the times may find a source of strength within themselves that will be creative, strengthening, and soul-satisfying. The frustration he feels when he conceives himself to be helpless in the face of overwhelming forces can be overcome by using inner resources that are only too often neglected. Our thoughts can easily go to places where our hands can never reach, just as the compositions of a composer may influence untold numbers of people whom he will never see. For the countless numbers who suffer because they feel they are swept on by the overwhelming tides of the times, the possibility of creative subjective work should be especially appealing.

Meaninglessness is an affliction that troubles many people, psychologists tell us. In many cases it results in suicide. When the importance of inner effort is acknowledged, a new dimension of meaning emerges that lends dignity to human endeavors. The unpleasant feeling of being nothing but a cog in a machine or of being alienated from society may give place to a new sense of responsibility and an increased understanding of human potentiality.

The general vision of helping the human race by weaving creative patterns of lighted thought may be stimulating, but we must now address ourselves to the more specific procedures whereby this possibility may be worked into the fabric of reality.

Problem-solving by Prayer

Our mathematical textbooks are filled with problems which students, by taking thought, may solve. The methods by which solutions may be reached are clearly indicated. In social and spiritual problems, the procedures are far more vague and tentative. Perhaps this is one reason why the world is more advanced scientifically than it is socially and spiritually. This state of affairs

should be changed by encouraging new, and perhaps unorthodox, approaches to our social problems.

For a long time we have heard that all problems are rooted in economics. The privations occasioned by poverty, it seemed reasonable to assume, tended to make people avaricious, mean, and criminally-minded. However, studies began to reveal that the children of wealthy parents were increasingly found among the alienated, radical, and criminal groups. These persons had suffered no deprivations or educational disadvantages. They had good prospects and enjoyed all that money could buy—but they became thieves, bomb throwers, drug addicts, social misfits, and criminals. It became apparent that their problems were not economic.

Many examples could be adduced impugning the concept that the solution of men's problems depends solely on the betterment of material conditions. In various parts of the world one may observe that increasing affluence has not necessarily made human beings better. Alcoholism, for instance, is not confined to the poor and needy. Criminality is not altogether the product of desperate poverty. The richest country in the world is not by virtue of that fact morally better than the poorer countries. Such assumptions are wide of the mark; other factors, it seems, play a significant role.

It would be a more balanced judgment to say that men's problems flow from their spiritual philosophy rather than from their economic condition. In fact, many of the great souls who have appeared on earth were actually very poor men. Jesus was not rich, nor was the Buddha. Socrates lived in poverty, and William Blake, the poet, had very little of this world's goods. Yogis and priests have renounced all possessions, holding that they are impediments to the spiritual life. When we talk of Milarepa, the Tibetan sage, or Epictetus, the Greek philosopher, we are referring to people who owned next to nothing.

Let us give thought, then, to the possibility that our problems are largely a function of our spiritual values. It follows from this assumption that changes in spiritual conceptions give rise to changes in material conditions. Of course, this approach

is somewhat indirect, and achieved results may not too easily be measured. However, other ways have been tried and proved less than satisfactory. For example, in the rehabilitation of prisoners both excessive punishment and excessive leniency have yielded about the same number of persons who have returned to criminal activities.

The assumption that spiritual values deserve priority has consequences. Instead of continuing the attempt to solve all problems economically, we begin to consider other approaches. We pay more attention to the prevalent thought patterns and consider ways and means of changing them for the better. The quality of life is stressed rather than quantitative accumulation of things. We accept our responsibility to create a climate of ideas that will promote the expression of man's nobler aspirations. Moreover, we take part in the struggle to improve the human race by affirming the spiritual values that should undergird a better way of life.

"Can a man, by taking thought," the Bible asks, "add a cubit to his stature?" In physical terms, the answer may be no, but in spiritual terms, yes. Indeed, a man is as great as the dimensions of his thinking. The thief is rightly condemned for thinking only of his own gain, and the philanthropist deservedly praised for his compassionate concern for other human beings.

Adding a cubit to our spiritual stature is exactly what the practice of meditation and prayer should effect. Theoretical doubts concerning this possibility should be countered by demonstrated effort. It should also be understood that patience is a necessary ingredient in this kind of work, for stubborn problems that have resisted solution for many centuries must not be expected to disappear overnight.

Let us indicate some of the areas in which improvement is highly desirable. Very tentatively, we list the following problems: crime, war, morality, capital and labor, poverty, and injustice.

In considering these matters, it is exceedingly important that we view them, so to speak, in a mirror, for otherwise we may be overwhelmed by the contemplation of human shortcomings. More than one thoughtful person has found the history of

man's inhumanity to man a heavy burden to bear. Anyone who would contemplate the sum of human folly, perversity, cruelty, and ignorance must be careful to fortify himself. Mark Twain, it should be noted, became a confirmed pessimist toward the end of his life.

In dealing with the issues that concern us, we must avoid all emotionalism. We must always stand apart from the problem, not become trapped within it. This requires dispassion and discrimination. In other words, we must constantly identify ourselves with the solution and not with the problem. We see the shadows, but we work in the light. It is essential that we always retain our emotional and spiritual equilibrium. To the extent we fail to do so, we become ineffective.

Identifying the problem, we direct an imaginative beam of light at it. As the sun disperses the shadows of night, so creative thought dispels darkness. In a sense, we seek thus to be lamps diffusing light into dark corners of the world. This is all metaphorical, to be sure, but we act on the principle that thought is eventually objectified, just as ideas find expression in action. If an evil thought objectifies as a crime, a constructive thought ought to manifest in a beneficent form.

We avoid formulating solutions. This is in accord with the statement in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth." Our demand is simply that the problem be resolved constructively in a manner that will bring the greatest good to the greatest number. We do not prescribe the manner in which the resolution is to take place.

It is of importance to remember that we should always stand above the problem, refusing to become emotionally involved, and that we do not impose our own solutions.

The repetition of an invocative statement may accompany the visualization of a lamp shining in the dark. For example, "Let the light dispel the darkness"; or, "Let the light of justice prevail." Each individual may formulate a statement of his own. It is interesting to note in this connection that the Creator, according to the Bible, used the invocation "Let there be light." It is a potent invocation that we, creators on a smaller scale,

might well emulate.

It may be of interest to note that the sun, the indispensable factor in all growth, acts by pouring forth its light. If this is true in nature, might we not reason analagously in regard to human beings? If we conceive of persons as miniature suns, might they not, by shedding abroad their light, produce significant effects in their environment? It might be interesting to experiment with this concept, acting as if it were true until conviction replaces uncertainty.

As a matter of fact, the *as if* technique can be most helpful in connection with many prayer experiments. If our efforts are undermined by doubts, the results will suffer. It is better in such cases to put aside scepticism for a time and to act as if the imagined theory were factually sound. It is best to avoid spasmodic wavering between faith and doubt. In one of his books, Dostoevsky writes about the learned knife—that is, the critical faculty of the mind—and says that it can ruthlessly cut away the finest elements in human striving. It might be of interest to note that in the declining days of ancient Greece, the Sophists came to the fore. These were people who offered to prove, for a price, that the better cause was the worse. The mind should not be regarded as the ultimate source of authority, although as an instrument it is invaluable. The progress of the human race, were it dependent upon the incontestable proof of spiritual tenets, would be exceedingly slow. As someone observed, What has concluded that we may conclude in regard to it?

We assume, then, that thought is a treasure of which man is the custodian, and that it represents an energy that can bring about vast changes in the environment. Prayer, being focused and directed thought, can bring about desirable transformations in civilization. The suggested method is simple, but imaginative. After a social problem has been selected, the individual refrains from imposing his own solution and takes care not to be overwhelmed by the negative or shadowy aspect. Standing in the light, he endeavors to act as a miniature sun. Visualization may be helpful. He may imagine himself to be a radiating lamp sending its beams forth to encompass the area where the problem exists.

Again, he may use the imagination to construct balls of light which he sends forth. Other visualizations may occur to him. Shelley imagined himself as a cloud bringing the nourishing rain to the parched earth; and again, as the wild west wind that purified and cleansed the atmosphere.

This is distinctly an exercise of the imagination. The suggested methods stimulate an aspect of man's nature that tends to fall into disuse with the years. The balancing of the rational and the imaginative faculties is a desirable goal for all human beings. When this equilibrium is achieved, the gap between faith and scepticism will be bridged.

Having considered man's vertical relation to his source, we have now dealt with his horizontal relation to his fellow men. These two aspects are symbolized by the cross. Our purpose has been to present a method of achieving a creative relationship on both planes. No hard and fast rules have been formulated. There is much room for experimentation and the modification of procedural techniques. However, everyone who works in this field has the right to regard himself as a pioneer in an area where much must yet be done.

ASSIGNMENT

1. *Optional*. Compare your reactions to this lesson at the first reading and again after you have put its suggestions into practice.
2. *Experiment*. Choose a social problem. Direct a stream of continuing light upon it, asking that desired solutions be found.
3. *Stretching the Imagination*. As the water supply depends upon a reservoir, so may the spiritual energy supply depend upon a similar storage facility. Imagine yourself building a reservoir of light out of aspirational thought.
4. *Sharing* (Encounter with Prayer). Please share realizations and results flowing from this work.
5. *A Suggested Form for Prayer and Meditation* (Alter to suit

your needs).

Stage 1: Linking with the Soul. Identify yourself with the serene, equilibrated soul. (I am the thinker, not the instrument used.)

Stage 2: Choose a social problem as your theme.

Stage 3: Encompass it with light. You may light up the area with many lamps.

Stage 4: Add to the reservoir of light for potential use in solving the selected social problem.

When you have completed the above assignment, you are invited to send it to The Editor, Fellowship in Prayer, Room 10-E, 200 East 36 Street, New York, N.Y. 10016. All replies will be confidential.

